

EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT: NON-FORMAL EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PRACTICES AT THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

According to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionaryⁱ, *Education* means, amongst other: **a:**the **action** or **process** of educating or of being educated; *also:* a stage of such a process

b:the **knowledge** and **development** resulting from an educational process<a person of little *education*>

i.e, a process that has as output knowledge and development.

Such output demands a very effective and complex process, involves several actors and environments and can be more or less formal. Traditionally, education has been divided into 3 main types - formal, non-formal and informal – and each of them has been defined and contextualized in different ways by several researchers. Nevertheless, in the process of education of students of the knowledge society of 21st century, the three types overlap quite often and play different roles in the process of lifelong learning.

This paper aims at presenting some environments of non-formal education, in a formal Higher Education Institution (HEI), in which undergraduated students from different programs and semesters can acquire crucial skills and knowledge on intercultural and interpersonal relations, entrepreneurship and other.

The non-formal environment examples are deeply linked to the management of international students' mobility by the International Office of a HEI, which greatly depends on the cooperation of in-house students in a non-formal learning context.

Being the Bologna Diplomas mainly a 6-semester education program, in some cases with no placement embedded, students are more and more looking for opportunities to acquire more and more context-based knowledge and skills to help them feel prepared for the global society.

In fact, Higher Education can become a fundamental (non)formal ground in which young people get a hold of skills and knowledge complementary to and/ or applied from the formal education in classes, which is needed to understand global problems and also important for their personal development.

1. Introduction

With this paper we would like to address the topic of education. But not of formal education. Our focus in this paper is on non-formal learning environments in a Higher Education Institution (HEI), in which undergraduate students from different programs and semesters can acquire crucial skills and knowledge on intercultural and interpersonal relations, entrepreneurship and other.

Aware that this might be a controversial statement, we will start by summarizing the main conceptualizations that non-formal education has had throughout the years in order to clear out the context of our analysis in this paper.

Then, we will give some reasons and examples of how a HEI can be a good floor of non-formal learning opportunities, in order to optimize the learners' skills beyond their formal education.

2. Non-formal Education: Concepts and Misconceptions

As Alan Rogers states (Rogers 2004), there is today a renewed interest in non-formal education (NFE), and not only regarding its more classic meaning related to poor countries. As stated by the Council of Europe (Dumitrescu 1999),

The Assembly recognises that formal educational systems alone cannot respond to the challenges of modern society and therefore welcomes its reinforcement by non-formal educational practices.

The Assembly recommends that governments and appropriate authorities of member states recognise non-formal education as a de facto partner in the lifelong process and make it accessible for all.

Alan Rogers manages to structure the conceptualization of non-formal education throughout time, since its first version in 1968, in the context of the widespread feeling that education was failing, both in developing countries and in Western (or Northern) societies.

By then, it is stated that the reform movement assumed different forms and non-formal education was seen, by some, as the answer for all the ills of education in those societies (Freire *apud* Rogers, 2004). Considered by many the ideal form of education, the investment of both governmental and non-governmental organizations in non-formal education is said to be high.

Others, on the other hand, seem to have found non-formal education a sub-system of education, inferior to formal schooling and only a need when the formal education system could not assure schooling (Pigozzi, 1999 *apud* Rogers, 2004).

Still in the early 70's, education was divided into three different categories: formal, non-formal and informal (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974: 8 *apud* Rogers, 2004):

Formal education as used here is, of course, the highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured 'education system', spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university.[...]

Nonformal education is any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children.[...]

Informal education as used here is the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment - at home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning - including that of even a highly 'schooled' person.

These concepts, although imprecise and unclear, have been followed, with more or less changes, throughout the years, even in the 80's after the concept of lifelong learning had already emerged and changed the main concept of education.

For instance, as it is stated by the Council of Europe (Dumitrescu 1999):

Education, as a lifelong process which enables the continuous development of a person's capabilities as an individual and as a member of society, can take three different forms:

formal education- *the structured educational system usually provided or supported by the state, chronologically graded and running from primary to tertiary institutions;*

informal education- *learning that goes on in daily life and can be received from daily experience, such as from family, friends, peer groups, the media and other influences in a person's environment;*

and non-formal education-*educational activity which is not structured and takes place outside the formal system.*

The main difference between informal and non-formal education is the fact that the first is non-voluntary and mostly passive whereas the latter results from an individual;

Non-formal education covers two rather different realities: on the one hand education activities taking part outside the formal education system (for example a lecture on social rights organised by a trade union) and on the other the experience acquired while exerting responsibilities in a voluntary organisation (for example being a member of the board of an environment protection NGO).

*A more operational definition by OECD is that "the formal system refers to all those aspects of education within the sphere of responsibilities and influence of the Minister of Education, together with private schools, universities and other institutions which prepare students for officially recognised qualifications. The **non-formal sector** comprises learning activities taking place outside this formal system, such as those carried out within companies, by professional associations, or independently by self-motivated adult learners". This definition is formally correct, but does not take into account the experience acquired in citizens' groups or voluntary organisations.*

*According to the more practical definition of the European Youth Forum, **non-formal education** corresponds to a collection of teaching tools and learning schemes that are seen as creative and innovative alternatives to traditional and classical teaching systems. Via personal interaction and flexibility in problem solving, people can discuss matters of relevance to their lives as citizens in society and integrate their knowledge. Different sorts of people take part in this process but the majority is to be found in non-governmental organisations involved in youth and community work.*

Besides accepting the 3 categories defined in the early 70's by Coombs and Ahmed (1974, *apud* Rogers, 2004) the Council of Europe considers non-formal education an important part of the whole process of Education of a person throughout his/ her life and a necessary supplement to formal education.

For this reason, Council of Europe has elaborated its own definition of non-formal education which intends to cover the gaps/lacks of formal curricula:

*[...] **non-formal education** [is] a "planned programme of personal and social education designed to improve a range of skills and competencies, outside but supplementary to the formal educational curriculum. Participation is voluntary and the programmes are carried out by trained leaders in the voluntary and/or State sectors, and should be systematically monitored and evaluated, the experience might also be certificated. It is*

generally related to the employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual person."

In fact, to elaborate own definitions of non-formal (and of informal) education has been a common practice since the original definitions were not very clear. Therefore, different countries have used the concepts in different ways and contexts and formal and non-formal education has certainly be a hot topic during the 60's and 70's (Smith 2011). There was one strand of non-formal education from the start which included children's alternative schooling, but this normally concentrated on those younger persons who were too old to go to school. Now large programs of schooling for school-aged children are run under the title of non-formal education: But non-formal education in this context (education in developing countries) now seems to refer to more informal ways of providing schooling to children and some adults who need it.

Also in the 70's, UNESCO recognized the importance of the subject and moved towards lifelong education and notions of the learning society which culminated in a Report on *Learning to be* (Faure 1972). From then and still until today lifelong learning was to be the 'master concept' that would shape educational systems, especially in the arena of western countries, where the concept of non-formal education has also been recontextualized. Under this new framework,

The former divisions into primary, secondary and higher are precisely what lifelong learning/education wants to get rid of. Lifelong learning/education sees learning as taking place not simply in schools and colleges but throughout the whole of life, in many different locations and times.(Rogers 2004)

In order to reach the whole range of education, the discourse of lifelong learning now naturally includes formal, non-formal and sometimes "informal" education or learning. However, the apparent end of the three-fold education concept and the adoption of a broader conceptualization has not completely cleared out what each of the terms was or was not. According to Roger (2004) there are at least two main reasons for this.

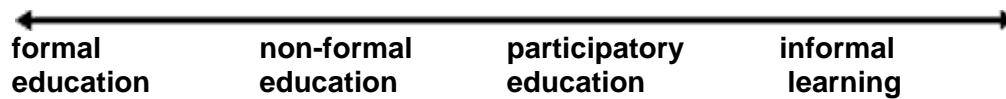
First, with the increasing diversity of formal educationⁱⁱ, it is no longer clear what is and what is not included under the rubric of formal education.[...] Where does formal end and non-formal begin?

Secondly, the term non-formal education now covers a very wide continuum of educational programmes. At one extreme lies the flexible schooling model - national or regional sub-systems of schools for children, youth and adults. At the other extreme are the highly participatory educational programmes, hand-knitted education and training, tailor-made for each particular learning group, one-off teaching events to meet particular localised needs. Most educational programmes will of course lie somewhere between these two points. But to include both kinds of provision under the heading of non-formal education tends to lead to confusion, for they are very different in spirit and in form.

Besides Roger, other authors (eg. Colley et al., 2002) state that the distinction between these concepts has never been very clear and different conceptions and misconceptions can be found in different sites and contexts. In fact, we believe that context (rather than site or actor) together with the degree of formality or informality of the learning experience are actually the key words to define formal and non-formal education. However, instead of focusing on the boundaries between them, we should

recognize that in the knowledge society of 21st century, and specifically in Higher Education Systems where the Bologna Declaration has redesigned and changed learning processes and environments in education, the traditional three categories of education overlap quite often and play different roles in the same “system” and time, throughout lifelong learning.

Trying to avoid the problems created by Coombs and Ahmed in their classic studies, Rogers (2004) drew a distinction between education and learning, creating a continuum, as follows:



In his proposal, informal learning would be all incidental, unstructured, unpurposeful learning, but the most extensive and most important part of all the learning that all of us do every day of our lives, as I have shown elsewhere (Rogers, 2003).

Differently from the original three-fold distinction of Coombs and Ahmed (1968) this continuum is not meant to be a new categorization, since also Rogers recognizes that the boundaries between each of these ‘sectors’ are very fuzzy.

However, the point he wishes to make is that:

Learning is the keystone; it is the original matter out of which all education is created. Somewhere along the learning continuum, we come to purposeful and assisted learning (education in its widest sense). When we control this and individualise it, learn what we want for as long as we want and stop when we want, we are engaging in informal education. When we step into a pre-existing learning programme but mould it to our own circumstances, we are engaged in non-formal education. When we surrender our autonomy and join a programme and accept its externally imposed discipline, we are immersed in formal education. (Rogers 2004)

These criteria, rather than creating boundaries, highlights the spots of formality and informality of the different education types in a continuum process of learning throughout life, putting forward what could be called a (re)new(ed) paradigm of education.

This approach to education, not searching for categories but for different contexts with more or less formality in each learning experience, has also been proposed by Colley et al. (2002) who analyzed a wide range of relevant literature on formal, non-formal and informal in order to be able to provide a concept clarification. Since this goal could not be accomplished for there was hardly any context where no degrees of formal or informal education were to find, Colley et al. (2002) concluded that there is no point in listing criteria to distinguish types of education. On the contrary, one should search for ways to group the criteria, and to identify deeper underlying organizing concepts in four main clusters:

Process: *This includes learner activity, pedagogical styles and issues of assessment: that is, the learning practices, and the relationships between learner and others (tutors, teachers, trainers, mentors, guides).*

Location and setting: *Is the location of the learning within a setting that is primarily education, community or workplace? Does the learning take place in the context of: fixed or open time frames; is there specified curriculum, objectives, certification; etc.*

Purposes: *Is the learning secondary to other prime purposes, or the main purpose of itself? Whose purposes are dominant – the learner's, or others'?*

Content: *This covers issues about the nature of what is being learned. Is this the acquisition of established expert knowledge/ understanding/ practices, or the development of something new? Is the focus on propositional knowledge or situated practice? Is the focus on high status knowledge or not?*

After this long contextualization of what non-formal education is or is not, we would like to sum up some of the main points brought up by the authors we mentioned in the former section, within the clusters of Colley et al. (2002):

Process	Location and Setting	Purposes	Content	Author
<i>organized, systematic, educational activity</i>	<i>outside the framework of the formal system</i>	<i>Provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children</i>	<i>selected types of learning</i>	Coombs and Ahmed, 1974: 8 <i>apud</i> Rogers, 2004
<i>planned programme of personal and social education; participation is voluntary and the programmes are carried out by trained leaders in the voluntary and/or State sectors, and should be systematically monitored and evaluated, the experience might also be certificated</i>	<i>outside but supplementary to the formal educational curriculum</i>	<i>improve a range of skills and competencies</i>	<i>related to the employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual person</i>	Council of Europe (Dumitrescu 1999)
<i>learning activities</i>	<i>carried out within companies, by professional associations, or independently by self-motivated adult learners</i>			OCDE

<i>Via personal interaction and flexibility in problem solving, people can discuss matters of relevance to their lives as citizens in society and integrate their knowledge</i>	<i>Different sorts of people take part in this process but the majority is to be found in non-governmental organisations involved in youth and community work</i>		<i>collection of teaching tools and learning schemes that are seen as creative and innovative alternatives to traditional and classical teaching systems.</i>	<i>European Youth Forum</i>
<i>Pre-existing learning programme is moulded to own circumstances</i>	<i>related to the employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual person</i>		<i>pre-existing learning programme</i>	Rogers, 2004

Table 1 – Non-formal features according to main authors referred to.

These four *dimensions* of formality/informality are potentially useful in analyzing and understanding learning in a variety of contexts, as Colley et al. (2002) do in their research. We will do the same now giving the example of an International Office of a HEI as a non-formal learning environment in a formal education system.

3. Why can a HEI be a ground of non-formal education

A HEI is not only the site for classes and teaching, but, first and foremost, an organization. An organization that is of course part of the “formal system” as a unit of higher education but that, at the same time, is made of many units, departments, associations and non-formal grounds and activities. An obvious example would be the students’ union or other students’ associations within the HEI, where learning is non-formal, voluntary and participatory, “involved in youth and community work”. However, even in some of the institutional HEI departments it is possible to find a suitable ground for non-formal learning of the students, “supplementary to the formal educational curriculum”, especially in those deeply involved with the students’ life. The International Office, as a mobility manager, is one of those units and will be our case-study in the next section.

3.1 Example: International Office

Amongst the many tasks in the daily life of an international office, mobility is certainly one of the most important. Incoming students and staff are one of the publics that are more demanding, both administratively and as far as their intercultural, academic or professional integration is concerned. From finding the right learning/teaching plan till accommodation and adaptation to a totally new environment there is a great deal of work to carry out, both before, during and after the mobility. And, of course, the international office should, not rarely, be the mediator to find placements... both for in-house students and its partners’.

As an administrative unit, the International Office is, then, expected to take care of paperwork, find contacts and placements, enhance outgoing/incoming students'/staff's intercultural awareness and, above all, communicate: by email, by phone or via website, with external or internal publics or as a mediator between publics. If, on the top of it, the international office is also meant to organize meetings and events, like Orientation weeks, International weeks, international conferences or other, then the workload and communication is even more.

Of course, this will be no problem in HEIs where the international offices have enough collaborators and they can take care of all the tasks as a normal part of their jobs. It can, however be a problem if you have high mobility flows, with many students/staff coming in and going out, and if you are willing to organize a couple of meetings but have few human resources to take care of everything... Or maybe not, if you see some of your "clients" (both national and international students) not only as clients but also as possible collaborators, in some dimensions of the daily work.

In fact, being the Bologna Diplomas mainly a 6-semester education program, in some cases with no placement embedded, students are more and more looking for opportunities to acquire more and more context-based knowledge and skills to help them feel prepared for the global society. So why can't the international office, dealing with youth and the HEI community, be the ground for a first working experience, formal or non-formal, giving them the opportunity to interact with international pairs, having, at the same time, an experience of internationalization at home?

That is exactly the case in ISCAP – School of Accounting and Administration, the business school of Polytechnic Institute of Porto, where we regularly accept several trainees throughout the year (both in-house and international), for more formal work and where we have motivated recently the creation of ComAP - the Buddies' Commission: an informal group of students who manage the buddying of international students in ISCAP. This is the example of non-formal learning in a HEI we will now elaborate on.

3.1.1 ComAP: an example of non-formal learning

With an average flow of aprox. 120 incoming students around the year, ISCAP is deeply concerned about their well-fare and adaptation to a different academic and cultural environment. Buddying has been always a means that the international office has found useful to help new international students not to feel strange in a new country and, at the same time, to help them know our culture better. At the same time, it is also a way of internationalization at home for in-house students.

However, finding buddies for so many students, managing them and making sure they really buddy the international students is very time consuming and, apart from a few buddies who quickly understand the "job" it is, sometimes, not easy to keep them motivated and active. In fact, only around 25% of the international students have met their buddy more than once.

Apart from the Buddying System, the international office has also been organizing since 2 years ago the Orientation Week, at the beginning of each semester. This one-week activity was also taking too much time to the international officer in charge of the incoming mobility, not only during the week, but before, organizing everything.

For these reasons, and because we believed that buddying cannot be a "formal" or imposed activity and that orientation of new international students, apart from the administrative part, is mainly something that runs better amongst pairs, we decided to invite some students whom we already knew quite well and had been perfect buddies to create ComaP - ISCAP Buddies' Commission: a student organization in charge of

buddying ISCAP international students and of organizing activities in the Orientation Weeks.

This is an organization with a core of 6 students, coming from all the 6 undergraduate programs in ISCAP, who recruit buddies amongst ISCAP students, train, coach and manage them.

Some mentoring and coaching of the commission was of course provided by the international office and this office is, of course, the umbrella under which all activities of ComAp are developed. However, the organization chart and activity development is autonomous and decided by students alone. Moreover, the time they spend in buddying activities is part of their leisure time: beyond classes or placements.

This commission was created in November 2011 and has already organized the Christmas Party for the Winter Semester International Students; has helped out in the search and distribution of accommodation and has been in charge of all the socio-cultural activities of the Summer Semester Orientation Week. Moreover, they have searched for buddies for the new 55 international students, distributed them, trained them and managed them. For this reason, this semester we were able to find one buddy for every 2 international students, when the average until now was one buddy for 3 or 4 international students. But, more than quantity I would like to refer to the quality. From our previous experience, only 25% of the buddies really did what they were supposed to do: pick students up at the airport, take them to their accommodation, help them find new accommodation in case they were not happy with it; help them in case of any need, include them in their friends' network. Now, according to ComAP, 50% of the buddies are active and cooperative and have been of great help in some cases of late arrivals, accommodation problems and during the Orientation Week.

We would like to point out that ComAp is not the umbrella for student placements but a student project, run in close relation with the international office, created to help us improve incoming student mobility management. Through the different activities they carry out, undergraduate students from different programs and semesters can, this way, also acquire crucial skills and knowledge on intercultural and interpersonal relations, entrepreneurship and autonomous work, apart from improving or learning foreign language skills.

After the first few months when we were mentoring them more closely they are now organizing themselves and organizing activities, finding solutions and managing some of the trouble of incoming students. They have managed to develop their own communication and task distribution and are now acting as a real students' association. This was not easy at the beginning of ComAp, especially because the group was made of students who didn't quite know each other. The international office invited some of the best buddies of the previous years and some new students and proposed the project, with a clear indication of the project manager: one of our best buddies ever. From here, they have developed as a group, and of course there were some conflicts and misunderstandings on the way. Over time, the international office was less and less present and the group more and more defined. We believe they are already coming to their teens: so, they still need some guidance in certain dimensions, but they are finding their way quite well. Nevertheless, monitoring and mentoring is always there.

With ComAp help, this last Orientation Week was not a complete pause in the office, in the incoming mobility sector, i.e. the international officer in charge of incoming affairs was not busy "orientating" students and organizing events and activities, but was in the office all the time; all the thousand problems with accommodation, sim cards, transports and other that usually occupy the daily life of the same officer these days decreased enormously, because incoming students had already talked with their

buddies and they would come to the international office only in cases that buddies could not solve.

This means that the workflow decreased, as far as newcomers' problems and event organization are concerned. Moreover, Incoming Students are happy (their posts in Facebook and smiles in the pictures are a proof of it) and already know a few Portuguese Students in ISCAP.

But, our main focus in this paper is on non-formal learning and this brings us back to ComAp as a non-formal learning ground. To check if ComAP had been an opportunity for any learning during these 3 months, we asked ComAp core members to tell something about their experience in ComAP. Here are some testimonials:

- *Intense contact with different cultures has helped me develop my personality and character as a more "international" person;*
- *I have developed skills in team work, intercultural awareness, language competences*
- *ComAp has helped me develop communication and interpersonal skills*
- *ComAp has helped me develop more skills, specially as far as team management and conflict mediation are concerned;*
- *Here our ideas are worth and implemented*
- *More than being part of a formal university organization and following orders, ComAp allows us to grow as persons and to act and prove we are able to solve problems*
- *International contact has made me more receptive to difference and new realities.*

For all that was said, describing ComAp, we can certainly spot many of the features of non-formal learning we have summed up in Table 1. For instance, we think we have managed to show that ComAP is:

- *an organized, systematic, educational activity*
- *where participation is voluntary*
- *with personal interaction and flexibility in problem solving*
- *outside but supplementary to the formal educational curriculum*
- *able to improve a range of skills and competencies*
- *related to the employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual person*

4. Validation of non-formal learning

"Validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong and lifelong learning. More European countries are emphasising the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in leisure time activities and at home." (Cedefop 2009).

Therefore, this learning under the framework of ComAp could certainly be validatedⁱⁱⁱ, meaning, certified. Nevertheless, this is a process we have not yet undergone. We clearly identify the learning but do not have pre-defined criteria to assess it and are also not recognized as stakeholder. We issue, however, a final certificate to all the students who cooperate with us in the international office, both trainees and buddies, describing their main functions and advise students to add this to Diploma Supplement. And, although this is no real validation, they do it, since they perceive this experience to be of great importance and relevance as far as "*employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual person*" (Dumitrescu 1999) are concerned.

Several guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning have been surveyed and proposed by Cedefop (2009) very recently and we hope we can move towards this validation process soon.

5. Some final notes

With this paper we hope we managed to prove that HEIs do have several grounds of non-formal learning, where students can complement their formal education and grow more as persons and professionally. Soft skills like interpersonal competences, team work and management, decision skills, leadership, respect, tolerance, citizenship and other competences which are so important in the current global society, and that cannot be taught and practiced inside a classroom, can be developed inside the school if we are able to include students in several school projects deeply connected with the HEI's community.

We are now starting two other similar projects, with other students, more connected with social entrepreneurship and hope we can get similar outputs with the new learners and that those projects can also be a good learning opportunity for the students.

In fact, we strongly believe that Higher Education can become a fundamental (non)formal ground in which young people get a hold of skills and knowledge complementary to and/ or applied from the formal education in classes, which is needed to understand global problems and also important for their personal and professional lifelong development.

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ⁱ Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2011). Online. Url: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/education>. Accessed on 30th November 2011.

ⁱⁱ Here Roger (2004) refers for instance to open and distance learning, private commercial educational programs, e-learning, work-based degree programs and other different forms of schooling.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The term validation of learning outcomes is understood as: 'The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.'*(Cedefop 2009)